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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1151
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 5951
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3108
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1509
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6098
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000282

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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: A THAW IN CONGRESS-COMMUNIST
RELATIONS

Classified By: Political Counselor Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Communist supremo Prakash Karat signaled that the Left parties could, under certain conditions, return to a coalition that includes the Congress Party. The Congress Party was quick to pick up the olive branch, saying it is ready to join hands with the Left parties to keep the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) out of power. It will take some time for the two sides to get past the bad blood over the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal, but both are reacting to political realities. They realize the need to keep post-election options open. The Communists, whose efforts to forge a Third Front are faltering, fear political irrelevance if BJP forms the next government. For the Congress, the Communists offer an important bloc of seats that will make up for the losses that Congress allies are expected to suffer in Bihar and Tamil Nadu. Given the fierce ideological opposition of Karat and the Indian Communist parties to enhanced U.S.-India relations, any government that excludes the Communists is as a rule better for U.S. interests than a government in which the Communists wield influence. End Summary.

Karat Opens Door to Congress Alliance ...

¶2. (U) In a television interview on February 8, Communist Party India - Marxists (CPM) general secretary Prakash Karat opened the door on returning to an alliance with the Congress Party following the April-May parliamentary elections. Karat told prominent TV interviewer Karan Thapar that he "would not rule out supporting a secular government of which the Congress Party may be a part" in order to prevent the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from regaining power in Delhi. Karat is the powerful head of the CPM, the largest of the four Communist parties that form the Left front. He was responsible for the most serious political crisis faced by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition when he spearheaded the unsuccessful charge against the US-India civil nuclear deal and acrimoniously led the Left parties out of the UPA in July 2008.

.... But Not to a Congress-led Alliance

¶3. (SBU) Karat added a proviso that "at no cost" would the communist parties support a Congress-led government (as opposed to one in which the Congress is a only a member). In the event of a Congress-led coalition, he said, "then we will sit in the opposition." Karat made no distinction between Congress-led governments with or without Manmohan Singh, noting that he did not feel betrayed by the Prime Minister who had always made clear that he intended to move the US-India civil nuclear deal through.

Karat: Top Priority is Third Front

¶4. (U) Karat said that the top priority of the left parties would be to ensure that the next government is a non-Congress, non-BJP formation. In this context, he highlighted the alliances and understandings that the left parties have forged with Chandrababu Naidu's Telegu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, Jayalalithaa's All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIDMK) in Tamil Nadu and Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. Karat expressed confidence that other parties will join this "third front" configuration and block the Congress and BJP from power.

Congress Picks up Karat Overture

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¶5. (U) The Congress Party was quick to pick up Karat's olive branch. Spokesman Abhishek Singhvi said that the Congress was ready to join hands with the Left parties and that it was incumbent on the left parties to keep "communal forces" (i.e., BJP) out of power. He underscored, however, that the terms of rapprochement could not be "dictated beforehand." In his view, it was the Left that had walked out of the UPA so the onus was on the Left to return and not the Congress to pursue. Singhvi also took issue with Karat's hope of a secular third front government, dismissing as unviable any such left-of-center formation without the Congress Party at its head.

Comment: Natural Allies

¶6. (C) Despite his qualifiers and conditions about Congress-led coalitions, Prakash Karat's opening to the Congress Party is not insignificant. Given the bad blood and harsh words under which Karat and the Left parties stormed out of the UPA only a few months ago, it was difficult to imagine they would start talking so soon. They have not yet buried the past and the bitterness will linger, but both sides are beginning to react to harsh political reality.

¶7. (C) For the Communists, the political environment is particularly challenging as they are bracing for heavy losses in their traditional strongholds in West Bengal and Kerala. Their numbers in parliament are expected to decline sharply from 59 they hold today and that allowed them to play an influential role in the UPA until their exit last July. Their effort to stitch together a third front alternative has made little head way. The TDP and ADMK are allies who could easily desert the communists -- and probably will -- if the BJP appeared to have the numbers to form a coalition. Mayawati of the BSP is congenitally unreliable and will go wherever she gets the best deal. In such circumstances, foreclosing a post-election alliance with the Congress Party could ensure the Left parties are condemned to irrelevance, as they were in 1999-2004 when the BJP led the coalition government in Delhi.

18. (C) For the Congress Party, the Communists, even with their reduced numbers, can make up for the heavy losses that key UPA allies -- Lalu Prasad Yadav in Bihar and Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu -- are expected to suffer. The Congress will also hope that the Communists can bring others, such as the TDP and AIDMK along with them. In the end, the name of the game after the elections will be forging coalitions, and both the Congress Party and the Communists realize they must keep alliance options open instead of ruling them out. Given the fierce and destructive ideological opposition of Karat and Indian communist parties to enhanced U.S.-India relations, any government that excludes the Communists is better for U.S. interests than a government in which the Communists wield influence.

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